

Experimental Film Audience

[response to questionnaire; August 86]
"Point of View" for Spiral 9

Chuck Kleinhans

In the post-WW2 era a substantial audience for independent film developed in the U.S. This audience, considerable in Manhattan but also present in scattered sites around the country, attended new foreign feature films circulating in the art house and film club circuits. It had an interest in the international historical growth of film art and developed a concern for a plurality of new forms which expressed aesthetic innovation. It attended films that often exhibited social rebelliousness and sexual dissent. This group of filmgoers saw dramatic features, documentaries on controversial subjects, and films of poetic self-expression as part of a general film culture which was challenging, in different ways, the political and cultural Cold War, at home and abroad. Filmgoing was a major art activity for the Beats of the 50s and the counterculture of the 60s.

In the late 60s and early 70s a distinct shift took place. Changing laws allowed the development of a commercial aboveground pornographic cinema. No longer were explicit sexual images either outlawed under-the-counter items or bohemian underground experiences, and a considerable part of the adventure and illicit savour of independent film evaporated. A radical social and political movement grew and diversified, taking on issues including the Vietnam War, Black civil rights and minority political power, education, health, and other social services, and new directions such as ecology, feminist and gay and lesbian concerns. The socially conscious section of the independent film community tended to move closer to practical and immediate political concerns and an increasingly conventional documentary stance. At the same time, the avant garde wing was formally institutionalized in the gallery, museum, and art school. This shift was fueled by changes in an art world seeking new areas to colonize and the establishment of Media Arts as a section of the NEA, grounding government influence in the arts. The artistic ideology which best served this move to the formally constituted art world was a structuralist-minimalist one, and critics and filmmakers elaborated the line.

Avant garde film entered the art world with some distinct disadvantages. Since there was no tangible unique commodity to buy and sell, film could never attain the high flying financial speculation of painting and sculpture. Avant garde film seldom had enough of a base audience to allow for

repertory or sequential weekend programming, as is common in experimental dance, theatre, music and performance arts. That practice allows, through subsequent journalistic reviews, the building of an audience for at least some work that can attract a broader interest group. Instead of recognizing criticism as essential for building an active internal dialogue among filmmakers, educating and expanding the regular audience and reaching out to alert and enthuse a new and potential audience, experimental filmmakers scorned thoughtful criticism, sought favorable PR. Film Culture, a lively forum during the 60s, in the 70s disintegrated into publishing old correspondence of the founders of the New American Cinema, and finally in the 80s the childhood and adolescent writings of Maya Deren--pure hagiography. Of course this fit in perfectly with the Reagan policy of "preservation," rather than "innovation."

Holding to an ideology and practice of individual self-expression and creative genius, filmmakers tended to concern themselves only with production--making work--and to remain detached from the institutions that created an audience through distribution and exhibition. As a result, the institutions were often staffed by individuals who ranged from flakey to flagrantly incompetent by the standards of the everyday world. (There were also many very competent, dedicated people, but that's another story.) Hardly anyone noticed, much less thought it peculiar, that a major distributor, the NY Co-op, went for a decade without updating its catalogue, or even having a list of titles added since the 76 catalogue. (Though this had the fortunate long range effect of breaking the lower Manhattan monopoly by making the West Coast's Canyon Co-op the distributor of preference among many programmers and teachers.)

The ethos of the gallery art world dictated the single artist's show as the norm for distinction. Experimental film imitated this with the one person screening followed by discussion as preferred mode. No matter how inarticulate, hostile, egomaniacal, spaced out, or stupid, the sole artist was assumed to be the best person to lead a discussion following a show. Many self-respecting audience members quickly figured out what was wrong with this practice and didn't come back. Even in variation, as with Anthology Film Archives' commitment to repertory and group shows, the underlying principle celebrated the isolated community of artist and spectator--even to the point of Anthology's notorious "Invisible Cinema" which partitioned spectators from each other, assuring a pristine and individualist film experience. Anthology finally stopped screening altogether, defining itself as an avant garde film institution without an audience. People who expected or wanted something more or other than that were clearly being asked to go elsewhere.

And they did. The independent film audience voted with their feet and left the avant garde cinema to a little corner of the art world. The mainstream art world hung around for a while and went back to painting, sculpture, and trendy concerns, picking up on a few well-packaged film fads steeped in art world concerns and personalities, such as the New Narrative of the later 70s and early 80s. Seeing a scene typically dominated by egotistical neurotic white men, many creative women and minorities looked elsewhere to find space for expression and audience. In addition to separating from the active social and political currents of the times, the avant garde film community increasingly purified its own range of interests. The goal of film art is to explore the nature of film art, filmmakers such as Hollis Frampton opined. This kind of purist formalism was ill suited to the younger generation who had grown up on television and had no problem accepting the mixture of entertainment and information tv offered and the glowing box as a legitimate medium. But their filmmaker elders, by and large, rejected video.

In the 60s Bruce Conner and Kenneth Anger used pop music soundtracks, found images, and innovative editing in their experimental work. Today's music videos use the same techniques, admittedly in a star and celebrity oriented way aimed at expensive high production values. Does this mean the avant garde won or lost? Both--it won from the dominant culture some style acceptance and a formally sophisticated audience of MTV addicts. But the film purists can only see the negative side, the obvious cooptation of art for commerce. For them film art is worshipped in a temple, not enacted in the many sites of video. Combined with turf guarding and well established personal and professional jealousy, plus intense competition for scarce resources, film separated itself from its most obvious ally in creating a better climate for moving image and sound art.